

'Evangelii Gaudium' amounts to Francis' 'I Have a Dream' speech

Dreams can be powerful things, especially when articulated by leaders with the realistic capacity to translate them into action. That was the case 50 years ago with Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, and it also seems to be the ambition of Pope Francis' bold new apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel."

In effect, the 47,500 word 224-page document, titled in Latin *Evangelii Gaudium*, given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on **24 November**, the solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, and the conclusion of the Year of Faith, **in the year 2013**, is a **vision statement** about the kind of community Francis wants **Catholicism** to be: **more missionary, more merciful, and with the courage to change. The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.** [1]

Francis opens with a dream.

"I dream of a 'missionary option,' " Francis writes, "that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world, rather than for her self-preservation." [27] In this renewal, the Church should not be afraid **to re-examine certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel**, even some of which have deep historical roots.

In particular, Francis calls for **a church marked by a special passion for the poor and for peace.**

The theme of change permeates the document. The Pope says rather than being afraid of "going astray," what the church ought to fear instead is "remaining shut up within structures that give us a false sense of security, "within rules that make us harsh judges" and "within habits that make us feel safe."

The text comes with Francis' now-familiar flashes of homespun language. Describing an upbeat tone as a defining Christian quality, for instance, he writes that **"an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!"** [10] or **"whose lives seem like Lent without Easter"** (6) but, rather, must be those who **"wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet"** (14).

At another point, Francis insists that **"the church is not a toll house."** Instead, he says, "it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems." At another point, he quips that **"the confessional must not be a torture chamber,"** but rather "an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us on, to do our best." These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. **Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators.**

Francis acknowledges that realizing his dream will require "a reform of the church," stipulating that "I am aware that nowadays **documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and that they are quickly forgotten**. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here **has a programmatic significance and important consequences**. I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. **"Mere administration" can no longer be enough.** [21] **Throughout the world, let us be "permanently in a state of mission".** [22]

Though he doesn't lay out a comprehensive blueprint for reform, he goes beyond mere hints, to fairly blunt indications of direction:

- He calls for a **"conversion of the papacy,"** saying he wants to promote "a sound decentralization" [32] and candidly admitting that in recent years "we have made little progress" on that front.

- He suggests that **bishops' conferences** ought to be given "a juridical status ... including genuine doctrinal authority." In effect, that would amount to a reversal of a 1998 Vatican ruling under John Paul II that only individual bishops in concert with the Pope, and not episcopal conferences, have such authority.

- Francis says **The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open.** One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are **other doors that should not be closed** either. [47]

- **The Eucharist** "is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak,"[51] insisting that "the doors of the sacraments" must not "be closed for simply any reason." His language could have implications not only for divorced and remarried Catholics, but also calls for refusing the Eucharist to politicians or others who do not uphold church teaching on some matters.

- He calls for **collaborative leadership,** [16] saying bishops and pastors must use "the means of participation, proposed in the Code of Canon Law and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear."

- Francis criticizes forces within the church that seem to lust for "veritable witch hunts," asking rhetorically, **"Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?"**

- He cautions against "ostentatious preoccupation" for liturgy and doctrine as opposed to ensuring that **the Gospel has "a real impact" on people and engages "the concrete needs of the present time."**

On two specific matters, however, Francis rules out change: The **reservation of the priesthood to males**, as a sign of Christ the Spouse, who gives himself in the Eucharist, **is not a question open to discussion**, [104] though he calls for "a more incisive female presence" in decision-making roles; and **abortion**. Francis says the Church's defence of unborn life "cannot be expected to change" because it's "closely linked to the defence of each and every other human right." [214]

He focuses somewhat meticulously, on **the homily**. It should be a heart-to-heart communication and avoid purely moralistic or doctrinaire preaching. [120-123] **The preacher** has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people. The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people. [154] He needs to be able to link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God's word. **Preparation for preaching thus becomes an exercise in evangelical discernment**, wherein we strive to recognize a call, which God causes to resound in the historical situation itself. [143]

The Pope's toughest language comes in a section of the document arguing that solidarity with the poor and the promotion of peace are constituent elements of what it means to be a missionary church. [198,205]

In relation to the challenges of the contemporary world, the Pope **denounces the current economic system as unjust at its root**. [59] Francis denounces what he calls a "crude and naïve trust" in the free market, saying that left to its own devices, the market too often fosters a **"throw-away culture"** in which certain categories of people are seen as disposable. [53] **He rejects what he describes as an "invisible and almost virtual" economic "tyranny."** [56]

Specifically, Francis calls on the church to oppose spreading income inequality and unemployment, as well as to advocate for stronger environmental protection and against armed conflict. **The family**, the Pope continues, is experiencing a profound cultural crisis. Reiterating the indispensable contribution of marriage to society. [66]

In the end, "The Joy of the Gospel" amounts to a forceful call for a **more missionary Catholicism** in the broadest sense. The alternative, Francis warns, is not pleasant. **Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary.** [272]

"We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in our own comforts," he writes. "Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide."



Excerpts from the Message of the 31st CCBI Plenary Assembly:

January 7-14 2019

1. There is so much that fills us with **joy, consolation and hope**:

* the fidelity, fervour and enthusiasm of so many Catholic lay groups and associations in different parts of India

* the heroic witness of the faith of our brothers and sisters, even to the extent of laying down their lives

* the silent witness of so many lay faithful, consecrated persons and priests who live their Christian commitment by walking the path of love.

* we see the urgent need to extend our loving service to all people – in particular the Dalits, tribals, women, migrants and refugees; and to remove all traces of injustice, exploitation and oppression in society and Church.

2. Many **challenges both internal and external** confront us in our mission.

- A continuous spiritual renewal of bishops, priests, consecrated and lay faithful to inspire and more joyfully proclaim the Good News
- to overcome fear generated by some incidents of opposition and violence
- to find means to reveal the “merciful face” of Jesus
- To go to the peripheries, instead of seeking security in institutions
- To promote welfare of Christians who suffer from various forms of discrimination
- (external) communal forces that threaten to deny communities their religious identity and rights
- Economic policies that favour the rich and adversely affect the ‘poor’
- Media sensationalism and the spread of fake news.

Pope Francis reminds us of the personal call for mission **Each of us not only 'has' a mission, but also 'is' a mission.** That is the only reason why I am here in this world.

We therefore make an ardent appeal:

- To all our **Faithful**: Make the world a better place with your love for God, overflowing into selfless deeds for justice, peace, harmony and care of God's creation.
- To Christian **Families**: Always bear the Good News at home, in the neighbourhood, in places of study and work, seeking to go forth and widen "family circles" by loving and serving all.
- To the **Youth**: Stay creative in mind, loving in heart, loyal to the Church and lively in your steps so that the freshness and appeal of the Good News may shine forth brightly in your words and deeds.
- To the **Clergy and the Religious**: Strive to be selfless missionary disciples, shunning every form of clericalism and careerism, so as to be faithful to your vocation. Let us constantly seek to announce the Joy of the Gospel to all,